



An Anarchist Life: Mollie Steimer (1897-1980)

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Mollie Steimer, the well-known anarchist militant, died of a heart attack on July 23, 1980, at her home in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Mollie was 82 years old, and throughout her long life she was consumed with a passion to work for the good of the people. One of the last of the old-time anarchists with an international reputation, she was also one of the last of a remarkable company of Russian political exiles in Mexico that included such diverse figures as Jacob Abrams, Victor Serge, and Leon Trotsky. She is survived by her lifelong companion Senya Fleshin and by a younger sister in New York City, to whom our heartfelt condolences are extended.

Born on November 21, 1897, in the village of Dunaevtsy in southwestern Russia, Mollie emigrated to the United States in 1913 with her parents and five brothers and sisters. Only fifteen when she arrived in the New York ghetto, she immediately went to work in a garment factory to help support her family. She also began to read radical literature, starting with

Bebel's *Women and Socialism* and Stepniak's *Underground Russia* before discovering the works of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman. By 1917 Mollie had become an anarchist, the creed to which she dedicated her life. With the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, she plunged into agitational activity, joining a group of young anarchists gathered around a clandestine Yiddish journal called *Der Shturem* (The Storm). Plagued by internal dissension, the Shturem group reorganized itself towards the end of the year, adopting the name of Frayhayt (Freedom) and launching a new journal under that title, of which five numbers appeared between January and May of 1918, with cartoons by Robert Minor and articles by Maria Goldsmith and Georg Brandes, among others.

The Frayhayt group contained a dozen or so young men and women, all of them workers of East-European Jewish origin, who met regularly at 5 East 104th Street in Harlem, where several of them, including Mollie, shared a six-room apartment. The most active figure in the group, apart from Mollie herself, was Jacob Abrams, 32 years old, who had immigrated from Russia in 1906. In 1917, as secretary of the Bookbinders' Union, Abrams had worked to prevent the extradition of Alexander Berkman to San Francisco, where the authorities were seeking to implicate him in the famous Mooney-Billings dynamiting affair.

The group, as a collective, edited and distributed their newspaper in secret. This was necessary because it had been outlawed by the federal government for its opposition to the American war effort, not to speak of its anti-capitalist, pro-revolutionary, and pro-Soviet orientation. ("The only just war is the social revolution," proclaimed its masthead.) After printing the paper on a hand press, the group folded it up tightly and stuffed it at night into mailboxes around the city. Federal and local officials soon became aware of their activities, but were unable to track the group down, until an incident occurred which catapulted Abrams, Steimer, and their comrades into the headlines—and also landed them in jail.

What provoked the incident was the landing of American troops in Soviet Russia during the spring and summer of 1918. Viewing the intervention as a counterrevolutionary maneuver, the members of the Frayhayt group resolved to stop it. With this object, they drafted two leaflets, one in English and one in Yiddish, appealing to the American workers to launch a general strike . . . "Workers, our reply to the barbaric intervention has to be a general strike!"

Each of the leaflets was printed in 5000 copies. Mollie distributed

most of them at different places around the city. Then, on August 23, 1918, she took the remainder to the factory in lower Manhattan where she worked, distributed some by hand, and threw the rest out of a washroom window on an upper floor. Floating to the street below, they were picked up by a group of workmen, who immediately informed the police! The police in turn notified American Military Intelligence, which sent two army sergeants to the building. Climbing from floor to floor, they encountered a young worker named Hyman Rosansky, a recent recruit of the Frayhayt group, who had been helping with the distribution of the leaflets. Rosansky admitted his involvement, turned informer, and implicated the rest of his comrades. Mollie was quickly taken into custody, along with others of her comrades. The same day, police raided the headquarters of the group on East 104th Street, wrecking the apartment and arresting Jacob Abrams and Jacob Schwartz, who were beaten with fists and blackjacks on the way to the station house. When they arrived, further beatings were administered. During the next few days, the rest of the group were rounded up and questioned. A few were released, but Abrams, Steimer, Lachowsky, Lipman, and Schwartz were indicated on charges of conspiracy to violate the Espionage Act, passed by Congress earlier that year. Rosansky, who had cooperated with the authorities, was granted a postponement of his hearing.

The Abrams case, as it came to be known, constitutes a landmark in the repression of civil liberties in the United States. The first important prosecution under the Espionage Act, it is cited in all standard histories of the subject as one of the most flagrant violations of constitutional rights during the Red Scare hysteria that followed the First World War. The trial, which lasted two weeks, opened on October 10, 1918, at the Federal Court House in New York. The defendants were Abrams, Steimer, Schwartz, Lachowsky, and Lipman. Schwartz, however, never appeared in court. Having been severely beaten by the police, he was removed to Bellevue Hospital, where he died on October 14, while the trial was in progress. Official records attribute his death to Spanish influenza, an epidemic of which was raging at the time. In fact, he had been brutally murdered. His funeral became a political demonstration; and on October 25 a memorial meeting, chaired by Alexander Berkman, was held in his honor at the Parkview Palace. It was attended by 1,200 mourners, who heard moving speeches by John Reed, who had himself been arrested for condemning American intervention in Russia, and Harry Weinberger, the defense attorney in the Abrams case, who had



Mollie

previously represented Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman in their trial for opposing military conscription in 1917.

The Abrams case was tried before Judge Henry DeLamar Clayton, who for 18 years had represented Alabama in Congress. Clayton proved to be another Gary or Thayer, the judges in the Haymarket and Sacco-Vanzetti cases. He questioned the defendants about their "free-love" activity, and he mocked and humiliated them at every turn.

Weinberger, the defense attorney, tried to show that the Espionage Act was meant to penalize activities which hindered American conduct of the war, and that since the American intervention in Russia was not being directed against the Germans or their allies, then opposition to it by the defendants could not be construed as interference with the war effort. This argument, however, was thrown out by Judge Clayton with the remark that "the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra la, have nothing to do with the case." The *New York Times*, praising the judge's "half-

humorous methods," declared that he deserved "the thanks of the city and of the country for the way in which he conducted the trial." Upton Sinclair, by contrast, said that Clayton had been imported from Alabama to make Hester Street safe for democracy.

Before the conclusion of the trial, Mollie Steimer delivered a powerful speech in which she explained her political beliefs. "By anarchism," she declared, "I understand a new social order, where no group of people shall be in power, no group of people shall be governed by another group of people. Individual freedom shall prevail in the full sense of the word. Private ownership shall be abolished. Every person shall have an equal opportunity to develop himself well, both mentally and physically. We shall not have to struggle for our daily existence as we do now. No one shall live on the product of others. Every person shall produce as much as he can, and enjoy as much as he needs—receive according to his need. Instead of striving to get money, we shall strive towards education, towards knowledge. While at present the people of the world are divided into various groups, calling themselves nations, while one nation defies another—in most cases considers the others as competitive—we, the workers of the world, shall stretch out our hands towards each other with brotherly love. To the fulfilment of this idea I shall devote all my energy, and, if necessary, render my life for it."

With a judge like Clayton on the bench, the outcome of the trial was predictable. The jury found all the defendants guilty. Replying to one of the defendants, who had begun to address the court about democracy, Judge Clayton said, "You don't know anything about democracy, and the only thing you understand is the hellishness of anarchy." Clayton sentenced the three men, Lipman, Lachowsky, and Abrams, to the maximum penalty of twenty years in prison and a \$1,000 fine, while Mollie received fifteen years and a \$500 fine. (Rosansky, who gave State's evidence in a separate proceeding, got off with a three-year term.) The barbarity of the sentences for the mere distribution of leaflets shocked liberals and radicals alike.

Meanwhile, the four anarchists were released on bail to await the results of their appeal. Mollie immediately resumed her radical activities. As a result, she was continually hounded by the authorities. Over the next eleven months she was arrested no less than eight times, kept in the station house for brief periods, released, then rearrested, sometimes without charges being preferred against her. On March 11, 1919, she was

arrested at the Russian People's House on East 15th Street during a raid by federal and local police which netted 164 radicals, some of whom were later deported on the *Buford* with Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Charged with inciting to riot, Mollie was held for eight days in the notorious Tombs prison before being released on \$1,000 bail, only to be arrested again and taken to Ellis Island for deportation. Locked up for 24 hours a day, denied exercise and fresh air and the right to mingle with other political prisoners, she went on a hunger strike until the authorities met her demands. "The entire machinery of the United States government was being employed to crush this slip of a girl weighing less than eighty pounds," Emma Goldman complained.

The government, however, was not yet ready to deport the 21-year-old prisoner, whose case remained before the courts. Released from Ellis Island, Mollie was kept under constant surveillance. In the fall of 1919, when Emma Goldman returned to New York after completing a two-year sentence in the federal penitentiary at Jefferson City, Missouri, Mollie took the opportunity to call on her. It was the beginning of a lasting friendship. Mollie reminded Emma of the Russian women revolutionaries under the tsar, earnest, ascetic, and idealistic, "who sacrificed their lives before they had scarcely begun to live." In Emma's description, Mollie was "diminutive and quaint-looking, altogether Japanese in features and stature." She was a wonderful girl, Emma added, "with an iron will and a tender heart," but "fearfully set in her ideas." "A sort of Alexander Berkman in skirts," she jested to her niece Stella Ballantine.

Soon after her meeting with Emma Goldman, Mollie was again arrested. She was imprisoned in the workhouse on Blackwell's Island, where she remained for six months, from October 30, 1919, to April 29, 1920. Locked up in a filthy cell, isolated once more from her fellow prisoners and barred from all contact with the outside world, she protested by singing "The Anarchist March" and other revolutionary songs at the top of her lungs and by staging another hunger strike. During this period, word came that the Supreme Court had upheld the conviction of Mollie and her comrades. Two justices, however, Louis Brandeis and Oliver Wendell Holmes, issued a strong dissenting opinion. "In this case," wrote Holmes, "sentences of twenty years' imprisonment have been imposed for the publishing of two leaflets that I believe the defendants have had as much right to publish as the Government has to publish the Constitution of the United States, now vainly invoked by them."

When the Supreme Court announced its decision, Abrams, Lipman, and Lachowsky jumped bail and tried to escape to Mexico from New Orleans, but they were spotted and captured. Mollie, who had been informed of their escape plans, refused to cooperate because it meant forfeiting \$40,000 in bail contributed by ordinary workers. To deceive the men and women who had come to their aid, she felt, would be a dishonorable act. In April 1920 she was transferred from Blackwell's Island to Jefferson City, Missouri, where Emma Goldman had been confined before her deportation with Berkman in December 1919.

Mollie remained in Jefferson City for eighteen months. Since the time of the trial, her life had been full of tragedy. Apart from repeated incarcerations, one of her brothers had died from influenza and her father had died from the shock that followed her conviction. Yet she refused to despair. Indeed, her devotion to her ideals was stronger than ever. Weinberger, meanwhile, with the support of the Political Prisoners Defense and Relief Committee, had been trying to secure the release of his clients on condition of their deportation to Russia. While Abrams and Lipman favored such an arrangement, Lachowsky and Steimer were on principle opposed to deportation. Mollie was particularly adamant. "I believe," she told Weinberger, "that each person shall live where he or she chooses. No individual or group of individuals has the right to send me out of this, or any country!" She was concerned, moreover, for the other political prisoners in American who must remain behind bars. "They are my comrades, too, and I think it extremely selfish and contrary to my principles as an Anarchist-Communist to ask for my release and that of three other individuals at a time when thousands of other political prisoners are languishing in the United States jails."

Abrams, exasperated by Mollie's stubborn adherence to principle, offered Weinberger a word of advice. "She must be approached like a good Christian," he wrote, "with a bible of Kropotkin or Bakunin. Otherwise you will not succeed." In due course, an agreement was concluded, and Weinberger obtained the release of the four prisoners, with the stipulation that they would leave for Russia at their own expense and would never return to the United States. The Political Prisoners Defense and Relief Committee took up a collection to pay for their transportation, and in November 1921 Mollie and the others arrived at Ellis Island to await deportation. They were not in the least upset about leaving America. On the contrary, they were eager to return to their homeland

and to work for the revolution. As their comrade Marcus Graham wrote: "In Russia their activity is yet more needed. For there, a government rules masquerading under the name of the 'proletariat' and doing everything imaginable to enslave the proletariat." Although Mollie's friends and entire family were in the United States, her heart was light at the prospect of returning to Russia. "I shall advocate my ideal, Anarchist Communism, in whatever country I shall be," she told Harry Weinberger five days before her deputation.

On November 24, 1921, Mollie Steimer, Samuel Lipman, Hyman Lachowsky, and Jack Abrams, accompanied by his wife Mary, sailed for Soviet Russia on the S.S. *Estonia*. The *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* (Free Voice of Labor) issued a warning. Despite their opposition to American intervention and their support of the Bolshevik regime, the paper predicted, they would not receive the welcome they expected, for Russia was no longer a haven for genuine revolutionaries but rather a land of authority and repression. The prediction was soon borne out. Victims of the Red Scare in America, they became victims of the Red Terror in Russia. Arriving in Moscow on December 15, 1921, they found that Emma Goldman and



Senya Fleshin

Alexander Berkman had already departed for the West, disillusioned by the turn the revolution had taken. (Mollie's disappointment in missing them, she wrote Harry Weinberger, was "very deep.") Kropotkin had died in February, and the Kronstadt rebellion had been suppressed in March. **Makhno's insurgent army had been dispersed, hundreds of anarchists languished in prison, and the workers' and peasants' soviets had become instruments of party dictatorship, rubber stamps for a new bureaucracy.**

Amid the gloom, however, there were some bright spots. In Moscow, Mollie met Senya Fleshin, who became her lifelong companion. Three years older than Mollie, Senya had been born in Kiev in December 1894 and had emigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen, working at the office of Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* until he returned to Russia in 1917 to take part in the revolution. He had been active in the Golos Truda group in Petrograd and afterwards in the Nabat (Alarm) Confederation in the Ukraine. In 1920 he had returned to Petrograd to work at the Museum of the Revolution. It was here that he met Mollie Steimer shortly after her arrival from America, and the two fell immediately in love.

Deeply disturbed by the suppression of their movement, Mollie and Senya organized a Society to Help Anarchist Prisoners, traveling about the country to assist their incarcerated comrades. On November 1, 1922, they were themselves arrested by the GPU on charges of aiding criminal elements in Russia and maintaining ties with anarchists abroad (they had been corresponding with Berkman and Goldman). Sentenced to two years' exile in Siberia, they declared a hunger strike on November 17 in their Petrograd jail, and were released the next day. They were forbidden, however, to leave the city and were ordered to report to the authorities every forty-eight hours. Before long, Mollie and Senya resumed their efforts on behalf of their imprisoned comrades. On July 9, 1923, their room was raided by the GPU, they were again placed under arrest and charged with propagating anarchist ideas, which was contrary to the Soviet Criminal Code. Sequestered from their fellow prisoners, they again declared a hunger strike. Protests to Trotsky by foreign Anarcho-Syndicalist delegates to a congress of the Red International of Trade Unions (Profintern) soon brought about their release. This time, however, they were notified of their impending expulsion from the country. On September 27, 1923, they were placed aboard a ship bound for Germany.

Landing in Germany, Mollie and Senya went straight to Berlin, where



Senya
Volin
Mollie

Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman were awaiting them. They arrived half-starved and penniless and without a permanent passport. For the next twenty-five years they lived as "Nansen" citizens (i.e. people without a passport), anarchists without a country, until they acquired Mexican citizenship in 1948.

In Berlin, and afterwards in Paris, Mollie and Senya resumed the relief work which had led to their deportation. Together with Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Alexander Schapiro, Volin, and Mark Mratchny, they took part in the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionaries Imprisoned in Russia (1923-1926) and the Relief Fund of the International Working Men's Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned in Russia (1926-1932).

In Paris, to which Mollie and Senya moved in 1924, they lived in a room with Volin and his family, before moving in with yet another Russian anarchist fugitive, Jacques Doubinsky. In 1927 they joined Volin, Doubinsky, and Berkman in forming the Mutual Aid Group of Paris to assist fellow anarchist exiles, not only from Russia, but also from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Bulgaria, penniless, without legal documents, and in constant danger of deportation, which in some cases would have meant certain death. At the same time, they joined Volin, Berkman, and others in denouncing the Organization Platform drawn up by another Russian exile, Peter Arshinov, with the encouragement of Nestor Makhno. To Mollie and Senya, the Organization Platform, with its call for a central executive committee, contained the seeds of authoritarianism and clashed with the basic anarchist principle of local autonomy and initiative.

In order to earn a living, Senya had meanwhile taken up the profession of photography, for which he exhibited a remarkable talent, becoming the Nadar of the anarchist movement, with his portraits of

Berkman, Volin, and many other comrades, both well known and obscure, as well as a widely reproduced collage of the anarchist press. In 1929 Senya was invited to work in the studio of Sasha Stone in Berlin. There, assisted by Mollie, he remained until 1933, when Hitler's rise to power forced them to return to Paris, where they continued to live until the outbreak of the Second World War. During these years of exile in the 1920s and 1930s, Mollie and Senya received a steady stream of visitors—Harry Kelly, Rose Pesotta, Rudolf and Milly Rocker, among others—some of whom recorded their impressions of their old friends. Kelly, for example, found Mollie "as childlike in appearance as ever, and as idealistic too." Emma Goldman, however, thought her too "narrow and fanatical," while Senya was always "ill and broken." Emma again compared Mollie to Berkman as a young militant and "a fanatic to the highest degree. Mollie is a repetition in skirts. She is terribly sectarian, set in her notions, and has an iron will. No ten horses could drag her from anything she is for or against. But with it all she is one of the most genuinely devoted souls living with the fire of our ideal."

The outbreak of the war in 1939 found Mollie and Senya in Paris. At first they were not molested, but before long their Jewish origins and anarchist convictions caught up with them. On May 18, 1940, Mollie was placed in an internment camp, while Senya, aided by French comrades, managed to escape to the occupied sector of the country. Somehow, Mollie secured her release, and the two were reunited in Marseilles, where they saw their old friend Volin for the last time in the autumn of 1941. Soon afterwards, they crossed the Atlantic and settled in Mexico City. "How my heart aches for our forsaken beloved ones," wrote Mollie to Rudolf and Milly Rocker in December 1942. "Who knows what will become of Volin, of all our Spanish friends, of our Jewish family! It is maddening!"

For the next twenty years Senya operated his photographic studio in Mexico City under the name SEMO—for Senya and Mollie. During this time they formed a close relationship with the Spanish comrades of the Tierra y Libertad group.

Mollie never returned to America. Friends and relatives had to cross the border and visit her in Mexico City or Cuernavaca, to which she and Senya retired in 1963. When deported from the United States, Mollie had vowed to "advocate my ideal, Anarchism Communism, in whatever country I shall be." In Russia, in Germany, in France, and now in Mexico,

she remained faithful to her pledge. Fluent in Russian, Yiddish, English, German, French, and Spanish, she corresponded with comrades and kept up with the anarchist press around the world. She also received many visitors, including Rose Pesotta and Clara Larsen of New York. In 1976 she was filmed by a Dutch television crew working on a documentary about Emma Goldman, and in early 1980 she was filmed again by the Pacific Street Collective of New York, to whom she spoke of her beloved anarchism, which Alexander Berkman called "the finest thing that humanity has ever thought of." In her last years, Mollie felt worn and tired. She was deeply saddened by the death of Mary Abrams in January 1978. To the end, however, her revolutionary passion burned with an undiminished flame. Salud, dear Mollie. Salud y Libertad!



Mollie Senya